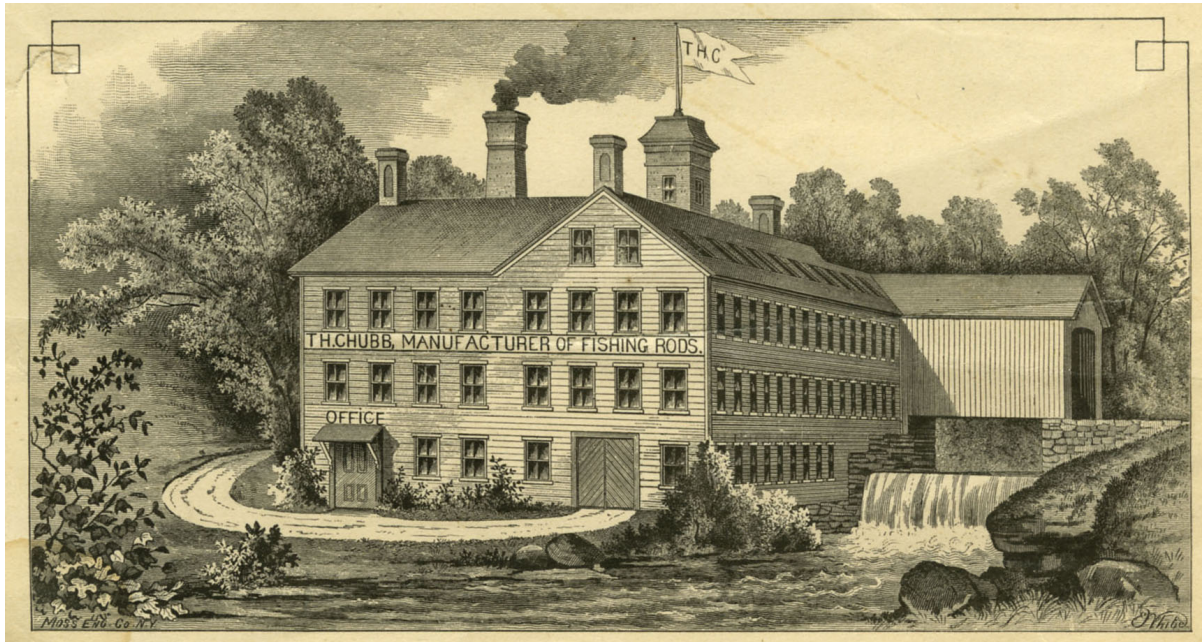


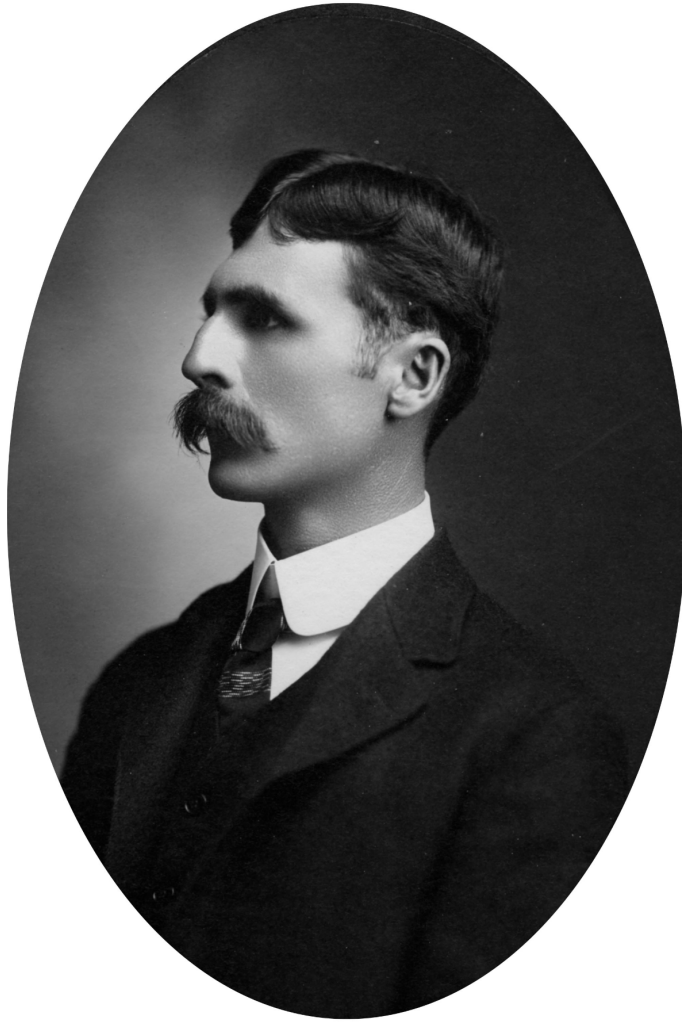
# Thomas Chubb's Fish Rod Factory

The Chubb Fish Rod Factory in Thetford was established in 1869, on the site of a former linseed oil factory on the Ompompanoosuc River, in the village of Post Mills. Founded by Captain Thomas H. Chubb, formerly of Galveston, TX, the story of the fish rod factory provides insight into the Gilded Age in Vermont, with a few twists which make it an atypical story, as well.



Thomas Henry Chubb was born in Charlestown, MA in 1836. Soon after, his family relocated to Galveston, TX, where his father, also Thomas, became involved in Texas' quest for independence from Mexico. The senior Thomas was a sailor, having went to sea as a young boy. He worked his way up the ranks of sailing and shipbuilding, and in 1860, just prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, Chubb captained an armed vessel known as *The Royal Yacht*, one of the first ships pressed into Confederate service to protect the southern coastline.

Meanwhile, Thomas Henry Chubb (shown in an undated photo, left) had graduated from Baylor University, and had married Isabel Mason in 1859. In 1860, Thomas H. was in his early 20s and was managing the family's plantation in Texas. He was both a Branch Pilot for the Port of Galveston and a Sergeant in the Hayes Rifles. Shortly thereafter, he was made Lieutenant in the Galveston Guards, a Company in the Galveston Militia. He was transferred from the Army to the Navy, and served on his father's ship, *The Royal Yacht*, as a sailor. In November of 1861, the vessel was captured by the Union Navy, and Captain Chubb was taken prisoner. Son Thomas was not aboard at the time, but after the vessel was retrieved by the Confederates and made seaworthy, the younger Thomas was made Captain. Chubb later captained three other vessels during the war, operating as a blockade runner. Captured by the Union on his last run, he was forced to pay a large fine to obtain his release.



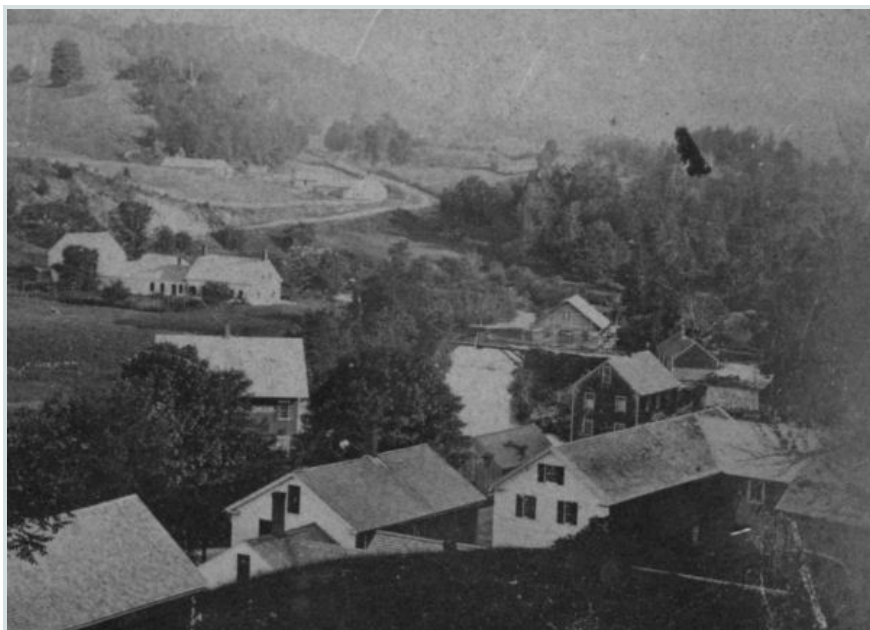
### Go North, Young Man

At the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865, the Chubbs remained in Galveston. Thomas continued to work for the Port of Galveston, and like many others in 1867, contracted Yellow Fever, which was rampant in Galveston at the time. His doctor advised cooler temperatures and clearer air for Chubb's recovery, and he traveled to New England to comply. It isn't clear what prompted the choice, but Chubb's destination was the Eagle Hotel in nearby West Fairlee, where he was refused lodging because he was a Southerner. Chubb was befriended by William Marston of Post Mills, who took him in. Vermont apparently agreed with Chubb's health, and he decided to relocate, sending for his family in 1868. His father, then known as "The Commodore" relocated to Post Mills in 1869, where he operated the Commodore House, pictured at right. The Commodore House was a favorite summer destination of Southern travelers.



### A Partnership, Then a Sole Proprietor

Chubb and Marston soon became business partners and purchased a linseed oil mill on the Ompompanoosuc River, which they converted into a less-than-successful rake and shovel handle factory. The image at left, from an undated stereoscope, shows the mill just to the right of the river, apparently under construction. It has not yet been determined which reconstruction is pictured here. Tradition credits a sales trip to Boston and the observation of inferior, handmade fish rods there as Chubb's inspiration for machine-made rods. Chubb was convinced that with a few modifications to the machinery in place in Post Mills, he could manufacture a better product in his factory. He returned to Vermont, bought out his partner, and converted the handle factory into one which made fish rods out of split bamboo, ash, and lancewood.

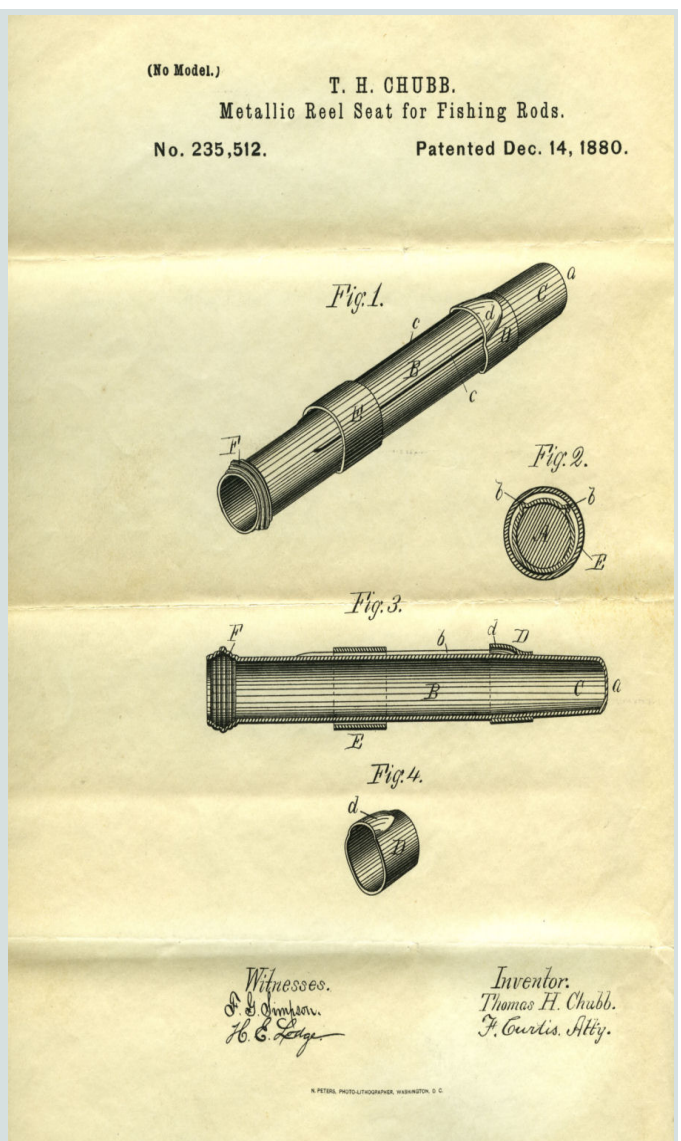
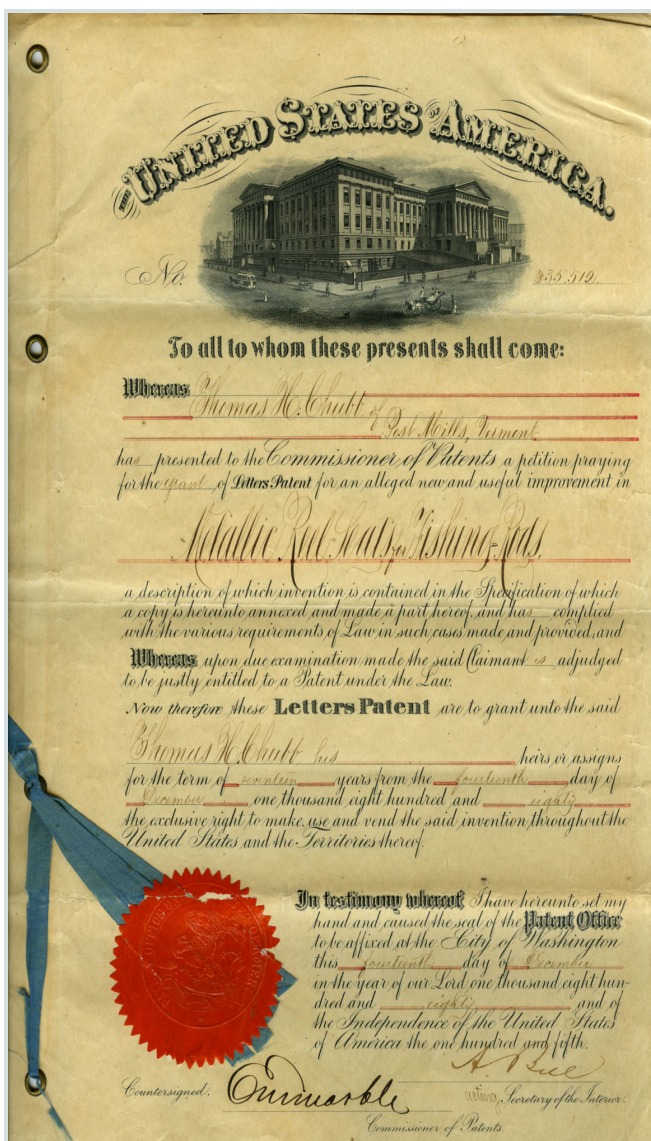


### High Water, and Flames

The infamous Freshet of 1869 destroyed many of the bridges and all of the mills along the Ompompanoosuc, including Chubb's. He quickly rebuilt, however, and the second factory building, with an attached covered bridge spanning the river, is shown at right. By 1875, the Chubb factory was the largest fish rod manufacturing company in the country, employing more than 50 workers.



In February of 1875, Chubb's fell victim to a fire, which destroyed the factory, the bridge, and much of the machinery. Chubb again rebuilt; a 32 by 120 foot, 3 story building with basement, and a 32 by 24 foot ell, which yielded 15,360 square feet of floor space. The building had 23 rooms, each with a specific purpose. The building was reportedly lit with gas fixtures, heated by steam, and the machinery was powered by a huge, water-powered turbine. The [catalog of 1888](#) provides a complete description of the "new" factory, with engravings of selected aspects of production.

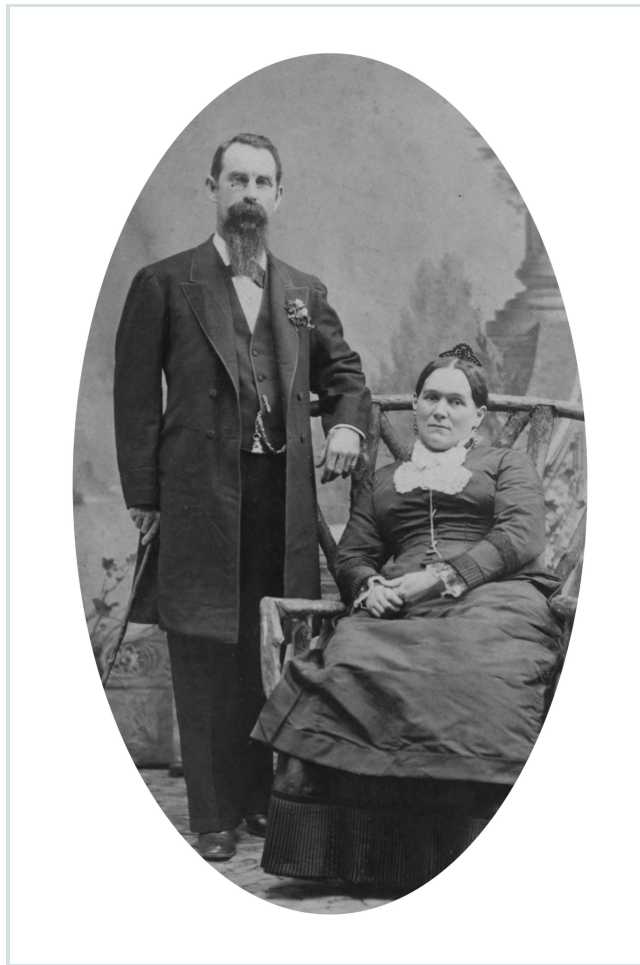




## Ingenuity and Invention

Chubb's signature product was the split-cane bamboo fly rod. Bamboo's light weight, coupled with flexibility and strength, made it an ideal material for fly rods. Chubb experimented with whole cane bamboo, but soon determined that a rod made out of split, then laminated, canes was stronger. At first, his rods were hexagonal, made of six thin strips of bamboo, which were laminated into graduated size segments. The rods were later constructed of eight strips, which yielded a more round shape in cross section. Chubb's bamboo was imported to Vermont from Asia, and the silver for the rod's fittings came from Germany.

One envisions Chubb as a man focused on the dual goals of an expanded line of products, and improved worker productivity. A successful businessman, Chubb was also an accomplished inventor, with a number of patents to his credit, both for fishing items, and the machines that manufactured them. The images at left are from an 1880 patent document for a reel seat, invented by Chubb.



## A Family Affair

From its inception, the Chubb factory was a local employer. Chubb's brother, son, and son-in-law were employees. With the exception of one man who walked to work all the way from West Fairlee, all of the factory's employees lived nearby in Thetford. Chubb's employed both men and women, which was a welcome, hometown alternative for a young woman seeking employment outside the typical fields of teaching, or millwork in Manchester, NH or Lowell, MA. While men generally operated machinery, a woman's smaller hands were better suited for the painstaking job of attaching line guides to rod segments by wrapping the rod with fine, red silk. Women also stitched carrying bags out of canvas, and lined rod cases with protective velvet.

Though his first reception in Vermont could be described as 'chilly,' Thomas Chubb quickly fit in to small town life. His Confederate service and political leanings (he was a Democrat, in a time when Vermont

was overwhelmingly Republican) were generally not held against him, nor was the fact that he brought colored servants north with his family. Chubb was respected employer, a benefactor of the local school, and held a number of town and state offices. He is shown at left with wife Isabel, on their 25th anniversary.

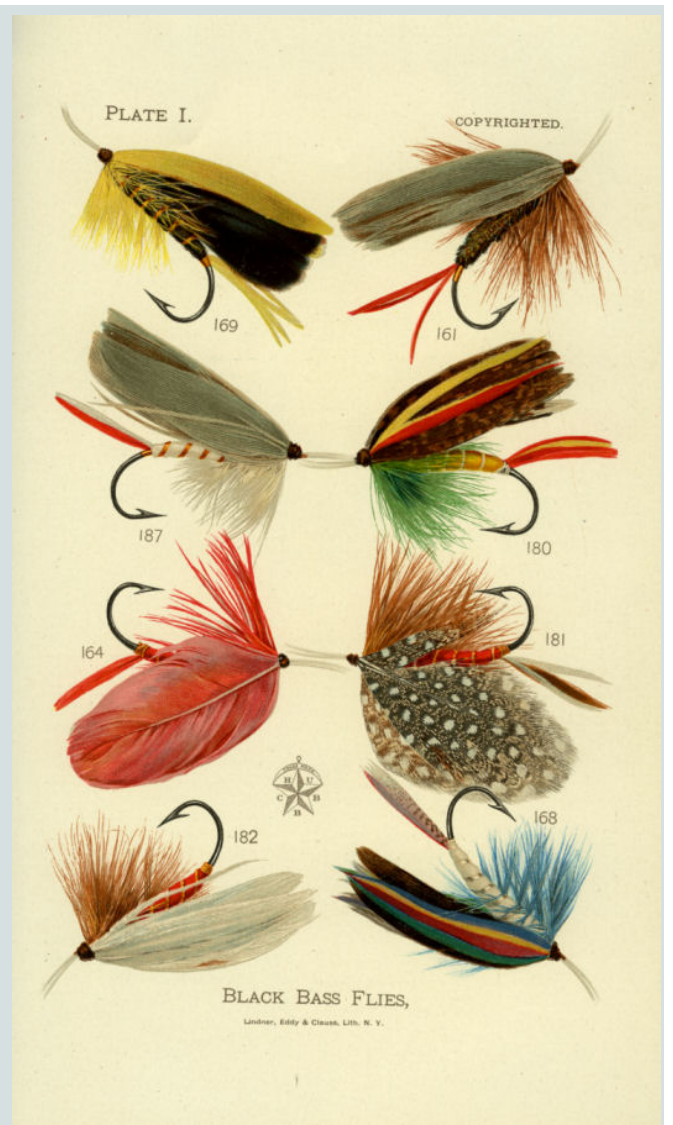
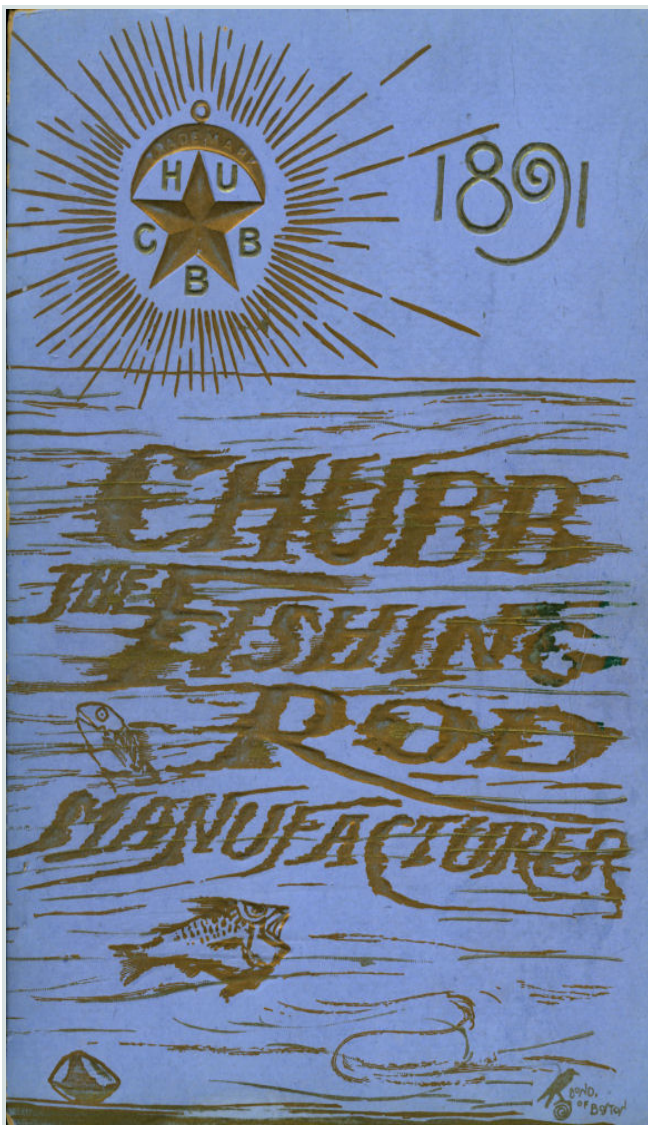
### A Marketing Marvel



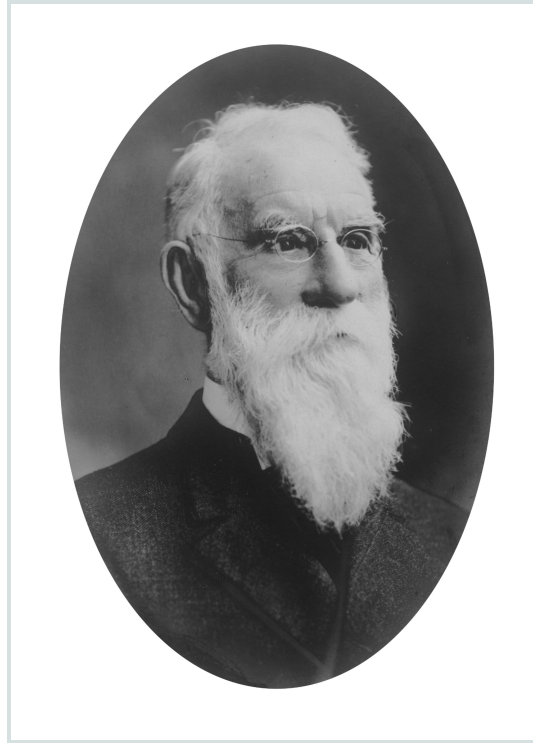
Thomas Chubb seemed to know intuitively that a new marketing strategy was needed to keep pace with his manufacturing productivity. Chubb rods were first sold to the wholesale market, but beginning in 1886, Chubb products were offered also to the general market in the form of a 56-page printed retail catalog, shown at right. The design, illustrations and type style of Chubb's catalogs are classic examples of Gilded Age art and advertising. Tapping in to the growing numbers of middle and upper class persons with the time and disposable income for recreation, Chubb offered a wide range of products for fishing, including partially completed kits for do-it-yourselfers, and replacement parts. 1886 also marked the first appearance of Chubb's distinctive star logo on goods sold.

Also taking advantage of print media of the day, advertisements for Chubb products were placed in newspapers such as *Harper's Weekly*, and articles were written in popular outdoors magazines such as *Wildwood Magazine*, and *Forest and Stream*. Later editions of the Chubb catalog featured articles on fishing and outdoorsmanship, as well as illustrations of Chubb's extensive product line. The 1891 catalog, pictured below left, was an amazing 90 pages long, and contained 48 pages of items for sale. The catalog featured colored plates of flies (below center). A collection of hand-tied flies in the THS collection, based on Chubb's plates, is shown below right.





## The End of an Era



Misfortune again struck in February of 1891, when a kerosene lamp exploded in the factory, sparking a spectacular fire. For a third time, the building was destroyed, and this time, Thomas Chubb did not rebuild. The high cost of rebuilding, failing health and increasingly poor eyesight convinced Chubb that now was the right time to sell. The Chubb Fish Rod Company had an excellent reputation, skilled workers, and Chubb had no trouble finding a buyer for the Post Mills property. The Montague Rod Company purchased the business, including Chubb's patents, and retained the T.H. Chubb brand on their products. They rebuilt the factory, and many of Chubb's employees were retained. Montague continued to operate in Post Mills until 1933, when the business closed for good as a result of the Depression, bringing to an end a 64-year history of fish rod production in Thetford.

Chubb stayed on for one year after the fire, assisting with the transition to new ownership; then he and his wife retired to Framingham, MA. The photo at right is Thomas Chubb dates from that period. Isabel Chubb died in 1907, and Thomas Chubb died in 1910. Both are buried in the cemetery in Post Mills.

## A Chubb Rod



Upper Right: the distinctive Chubb star logo.



Lower Right: line guides secured with red silk thread.

Bottom: A complete fly rod, with two tips. The rod came in a velvet-lined carrying case, which kept the rod segments straight. An inner canvas bag kept pieces clean and dry, and an outer leather carrying case with handle made the outfit easy to store and transport. When assembled, the rod measured 108" long. (THS Collection)



<http://www.thetfordhistoricalsociety.org/index.php>  
<http://www.thetfordhistoricalsociety.org/Chubb.htm>



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